

## “Image Bearers”

Then God said, “ Let us make human kind in our image, according to our likeness and let them have dominion/stewardship over the fish of the seas, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing upon the earth, everything that has breath of life. So, God created humankind in His image; in the image of God He created them male and female He created them, God blessed them, and God said to them. “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion/stewardship over every living thing that moves upon the earth. And it was so. God saw everything that He had made and indeed it was very good.” (Genesis 1:26-30)

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in Him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (John 1:1-5) And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory of a Father’s only son, full of grace and truth.

From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart who has made God known to us. The incarnate Word: Jesus, fully divine and fully human, came to earth to teach, model, guide, witness, forgive, save and usher in God’s kingdom focused on inclusion, unconditional love and unification reflecting the very image of God. It is through Him that we know what being created in the image of God means, for through His living, Jesus (the Word made flesh) showed us how to reflect God’s love. It is not the physical image of God, but rather the innate character of God our Creator that we are called and empowered by the Holy spirit to reflect. Though we may be at different places on our spiritual journey and relationship with God, all human beings regardless of race, gender, religion, age and culture, are image bearers. That is our identity regardless of our particular situation or station in life. It is who we are, and it is our calling. It is up to all human beings to spread God’s love and in so doing to be stewards of all of creation, building up the kingdom of God as we reflect the image of God empowered by the Holy Spirit with the same unconditional and inclusive love that God graciously gives to all His children.

The reality that God created and called all humans to reflect His love to the world is a significant, overwhelming and humbling gift isn’t it? How can we ever live consistently into that birth-rite? God sent His only son to teach us how to be image bearers, but it is a daunting task for sure. Though God created all human beings in His image and declared all of His creation good, He also gives humans free will. Though our innate nature is to embrace God’s

image, our experiences in this life are many times guided by the choices we ourselves make or the choices that others make that may affect us, and unfortunately those choices do not always reflect God's image. So, the question is, what do we, as image bears do, when the choices we chose, or the choices others make run counter to God's image which we are called to reflect? How do we witness and usher in God's kingdom defined by: unconditional love, justice, peace, love and faith for all of God's children, when we are overcome by the storms of life ourselves?

In addition to modeling how to live into the image of which we were created, Jesus gave us two commandments to help us live reflecting God's likeness saying: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart mind and soul, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." That sounds easy enough doesn't it? Pretty straight forward. Do that and the Kingdom of God will come on earth as it is in heaven. However, as good as God declared His creation to be, there are times that we encounter turbulent storms that challenge and unbalance us often to the point of drawing us away from living into the image of which we were created. At such times it is a challenge to live reflecting God's Holy image and to feel, let alone spread, the unconditional love of God that we are called to reflect.

Unfortunately, we are currently in one of those turbulent storms that has taken several different forms at this time. The first storm occurred approximately six months ago when a fierce pandemic referred as the COVID-19 virus spread across the world. It spread easily and fast, leaving in its path many people seriously ill, taking thousands of lives and overwhelming the medical facilities. In an attempt to manage this storm, we were forced to live in quarantine for days. As a result, many lost their employment which created severe economic difficulties. Social distancing including the wearing of masks, were both enforced, causing extreme stress as we attempted to stay connected as we were forced to stay apart. Depression, hopelessness, frustration, and impatience developed as the virus spiked and schools, stores and churches were closed.

As the pandemic raged on, there was an increase of violence toward one another as frustrations overflowed. Acts of grave injustice and even murder were carried out primarily against people of color as long seated racial prejudice poured out onto the streets. Long standing differences between people turned into excuses to create a division of an "us and them" way of thinking and living as people searched for someone to vent to and to blame for the unsettledness of the time. Suffering, torture, hatred, despair, hopelessness, injustice and death caused people to raise up in protest crying for justice and change.

People joined together to let their voices be heard in both peaceful protest against what they perceived as injustice and in violent protest, voicing their frustration and anger regarding the situation of the times. In both the peaceful protest and the violent protest, cries went out for justice and equality, demanding reforms be put into place.

All of the storms we are currently experiencing have stirred up a wide variety of feelings, including despair, fear, hopelessness, rage, sadness, and loneliness to name just a few. Needless to say, as those called to be bearers of God's image, it is difficult to reflect the steadfast unconditional love of God when we ourselves are feeling despair, anger, impatience, and hopelessness. At times even though we are children of God created in the image of God to reflect that image to the world, we find ourselves lamenting like the Psalmist in Psalm 13 saying; "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death". And then, as the storm begins to clear our path back to God our blessed Creator, as image bearers we find ourselves saying as the Psalmist says: "But I do trust your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because He has dealt bountifully with me". Life is full of both beauty and suffering, but in the end, as image bearers, God always clears a way for us back to the beauty of His unconditional love, caring, compassion, and hope, all fueled by our endless innate faith in Him.

The reality is that not all storms come to disrupt our life. Some storms come to clear our path. All three of these current storms we are living through: the pandemic, the increased violence, and the protesting, have offered us new insights and opportunities enabling us to step into a new way of being, setting before us the gift of a new vision that embraces God's will for us to live in harmony and peace with one another. As we have witnessed through the raging waves of fear and distress, we have seen acts of love emerging and reforms being offered. The storms have been clearing and opening a pathway of being that offers and reflects God's image of unconditional love and compassion for one another, patience, trust, understanding, forgiveness, justice, increased understanding of one another and hope. It is a path that leads to hope, not only for us individually but for the whole created world. As the despairing Psalmist came to say; in spite of the painful unsettling turmoil, once again we are beginning to be able to say that we trust in God's steadfast love. As image bearers, we continue to move through these days of unknown storms in faith and in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. This wish is offered to you all: "May today there be peace within. May you trust your highest power that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith. May you use those gifts that you have received and pass on the love that has been given to you. May you be content knowing you are a child of God. Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, and dance. It is there for each and every one of you."

AMEN.

~Created by Rev Kathryn Bindig, MDiv. MS; Pastoral Care Minister

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